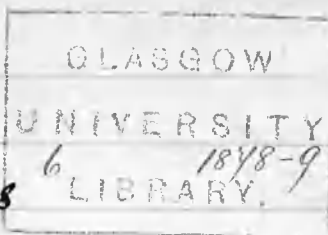


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The Causes of Insanity

William Macfarlane

20th June 1878

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The Causes of Insanity.

The complexity, number and, often, obscurity of the circumstances which contribute to insanity not only renders it extremely difficult to arrive at accurate data regarding the causation, but also, makes the subject one of such wide extent that to enter into a discussion of all the causes, would extend this paper beyond due limits. I shall therefore confine my remarks chiefly to a few of the most important causes.

The late Sir James Cox in a pamphlet published a few months ago states that ninety per. cent. of the lunatics in asylums and elsewhere are incurable, if, when insanity has become pronounced the prospect is so hopeless and medical skill so futile, it behooves us to consider whether efforts to prevent it may not prove

more successful. There can be no doubt but that the application of preventive medicine to insanity has hitherto been greatly neglected, but before this can be remedied we must arrive at a more accurate knowledge of the causes.

Statistics teach us that intemperance and other indulgences are among the most common exciting causes of insanity, but besides exciting causes there are other conditions called predisposing causes which must also be taken into account: these include man's whole physical and mental training, external circumstances which mould his character and tendencies transmitted by inheritance.

Before going on to discuss certain causes specially we shall make a few remarks bearing on causes in general, more particularly on predisposing, enumerating and illustrating

some of these.

Man is not born with mind, he is born with a brain and the power of acquiring mind. He acquires ideas through impressions received by the senses, conveyed to the nerve centres and registered there. He acquires the power of associating one idea with another, forming judgments upon them, and creating new ideas out of old ones. The emotions in an infant are represented by the mere feelings of pleasure and pain: as the child's mind develops out of these feelings of pleasure and pain are evolved such emotions as, pride, hope, shame, love, fear, and others more or less complex according to the mental development of the individual. In the child, the savage, the man whose brain is degenerated through disease or whose mind is undeveloped from want of culture, the emotions are simpler, more easily

excited, less under control, and more liable to result in action, than, in the highly educated and civilized man, whose emotions are more complex, more refined and more under his control, in the latter a feeling may create a desire for action but he represses it because his knowledge teaches him that it is better to do so, and he has feelings and ideas which enable him to counteract the impulse.

The child who is brought up with surroundings conducive to a healthy physical and mental development - in whom truth, justice, and honour are inculcated and to whom is imparted a knowledge of the laws of health will have a mind stored with ideas which would counteract incitement to crime and depravity, excesses and idleness. On the other hand a child reared in ignorance

among misery, crime and vice, has been placed under circumstances which create injurious desires and he has no impressions, stored in his mind, which might counteract inclination to evil. For example, a man may be importuned, or urged by the force of example to imbibe alcohol, till a craving is developed within him leading to excessive intemperance at the same time he may have been ignorant of the deleterious effects of alcohol. Here we have two conditions the mans external circumstances and ignorance, the absence of either of which might have averted the man from ruin. Or, again, a man who indulges in excessive or indiscriminate sexual intercourse might have been averted therefrom by a knowledge of the evil consequences to which they give rise Or a boy may become a masturbator

through the force of example, he may consider it a harmless indulgence, or he only vaguely conscious that it is wrong, till, at last, it produces insanity or it might be that, after indulging for some time, he acquired a knowledge of the consequences when he immediately ceased it; here knowledge prevented insanity.

Circumstances or training which lead to the disproportionate use and development of the mental faculties are frequent predisposing causes. The moderate use of any part produce a healthy state and activity of that part and change of mental occupation is mental recreation while the excessive use of a part and constant running of the thoughts in one groove produce over activity and disease. For instance, ambition may be constantly fostered till it becomes the ruling passion, that part of the brain which

is connected with this emotion become by repeated stimulation more active and highly developed, nearly all the thoughts of the individual are subordinated to this passion, they are to a great extent of a low order—selfish. Here men, a class of thoughts have formed for themselves—as it were grooves in the brain, which they occupy to the exclusion of other thoughts and the proportionate diminution of other useful mental faculties. There may be a frequent recurrence of ideas as to how the object of ambition may be attained, perhaps, a pondering over the fancied possession of it, or other unbridled ramblings of the imagination regarding it. External circumstances may intervene and frustrate the attainment of his desires, or the object of ambition may have been altogether beyond his reach: in which case he is the subject of continual disapp-

ointment and an unabated craving which induce a perpetual condition of mental worry which upsets the equilibrium of the mind. Perhaps the fancies of the imagination in which he indulged have become so engrained in his brain that they now become delusions. So too vanity may be fostered and indulged till the reason is upset and the person becomes the subject of delusional insanity. Again vicious impressions may produce vicious ideas these vicious desires and the latter vicious actions which may lead to insanity. A frequent indulgence in pleasurable excitement even if perfectly innocent will tend to produce a dissipated mind.

or again a man may be placed in such circumstances that his anger is frequently excited, anger unrepressed produces cerebral excitement, one outburst predisposes to another

and these frequently repeated, may lead the way to maniacal excitement.

Having made these few general remarks from which it will be evident that as mans circumstances are more or less under his own control upon his actions will depend the state of his mind - at least to a great extent, I shall now proceed to a more detailed consideration of a few of the most important causes.

Inherited tendency to insanity is of all predisposing causes the most powerful and the most common. The amount of insanity due to this cause has been variously estimated at from 10 to 90 per cent. The wide disparity between these computations, at least, illustrates the difficulty of arriving at accurate data, people may be ignorant of the history of their ancestors or, as often happens anxious

to conceal that there is insanity in the family, or again the discrepancies may be due to statisticians themselves some looking for insanity only others more properly taking into account all nervous disorders. Esquirol traced hereditary predisposition 837 times among 1375 lunatics, that is, in about 24 per. cent. Holst is said to have traced it in 323 cases out of 467 or in 69 per. cent. Dr Webster traced it in 32 per. cent. of the patients admitted into Bethlem Hospital. In the Glasgow Royal Asylum report for 1876, heredity is given as the apparent or assigned cause in 31 out of 228 admissions. In the Prestwick Asylum it was traced in 16 per. cent. of the patients admitted during 1876. In the Sryggle and Bute Asylum report for 1873 it is stated that out of a total of 83 admissions heredity was traced in 25 cases or 31.2 per. cent.

But, the statistics of causes usually given

in asylum reports are open to a source of grave fallacy and comparatively valueless, for, before a patient is admitted into an asylum the relieving officer or whoever petitions the Sheriff is asked to state the supposed cause, in many instances he returns it as unknown or if he states what in his opinion the cause is very often, as might be expected it is incorrect, for instance we have seen sunstroke returned as the cause although it was the month of January and the true causes were drink and epilepsy. These are the statistics sent to the Commissioners of Lunacy and upon which the tables in asylum reports are based, as a rule, besides being very incomplete they are utterly unreliable. Frequently there is more than one cause for example, heredity drink and epilepsy may be the combined factors which induce an attack of insanity.

This again has been another source of fallacy and confusion in making up statistics, as usually, in tabulating causes only one is taken although there may have been several, and of course when there are two or more it is incorrect to state that any one cause was the cause of insanity, also this is the source of much apparent disparity in the relative frequency of causes, on account of different opinions held by various writers. for instance in Glasgow Royal Asylum report previously alluded to heredity is given as the cause in 31 cases out of 228 admissions and ranked along with drink, epilepsy, and other exciting causes. this is the customary method but in some reports e.g. fifth report of the Northern Asylum of the State of Wisconsin where the causes of the insanity of 173 admissions are given hereditary tendency is not once mentioned

although it appears from another part of the same report that it was traced in a considerable proportion. Here the tabulator evidently considered that as heredity is simply a predisposing condition it should not be ranked along with exciting causes.

To remedy these sources of confusion and to obtain more general accuracy, Dr. Major has recently, in a contribution to the Journal of Psychological Medicine*, proposed a new and much better method of tabulation. He takes all the chief causes whether one, two, three or more and in placing them in a tabular form adds them together like to like irrespective of the number of cases under consideration and instead of saying that any one cause produced insanity in so many cases says that it contributed to the production of so many cases. For example in the case of-

"9. The causes were Heredity, alcohol, previous attacks

E. P.	"	"	"	Over lactation, grief
M. S.	"	"	"	Old age, grief
M. G. C.	"	"	"	Heredity, climacteric period
J. L.	"	"	"	Old age
E. H.	"	"	"	Grief, privation, climacteric period"

These causes he tabulates thus

"Heredity contributed to the production of 2 cases

Alcoholism " " " " 1

Over lactation " " " " 1

Grief " " " " 3

Old age " " " " 2

Climacteric period " " " " 2

Privation " " " " 1 "

Adopting this method we have made a very careful investigation into the causes of insanity of 100 patients (50 males and 50 females) admitted in succession into Govan Provincial Asylum, there being cases where the disease had not been

of long standing and the prognosis comparatively favourable; also, of 100 patients (50 males and 50 females) representing the stock population of the asylum, persons who have been confined for periods of from 2 to 20 years and whose prognosis is highly unfavourable. In the investigation of the causes of these 200 cases, the family history, past history, and clinical condition of the individual were all taken into account. The results appear in the following tables.

Table I

Of 100 cases recently admitted.

	Males	Females	Total
Hereditary <u>contributed to the production of</u>	12	21	33
Alcohol	23	12	35
Epilepsy	7	2	9
Self-abuse	7	3	10
Other sexual excesses	4	3	7
Syphilis	1	1	2
Puerperal state		6	6

Table I (continued)

	M	F	Total
Lactation		4	4
Old Age	2	2	4
Privation	7	2	9
Climacteric period		4	4
Sunstroke	1		1
Ill health from lung disease	3		3
" " " liver "	1		1
" " " Typhoid fever	1	1	2
" " " other bodily diseases	2	3	5
Injury to skull	1		1
Magnetism.	1		1
Religion	2	3	5
Disappointed Affections		4	4
Wounded Feelings		2	2
Business Anxieties	1		1
Grief	1	2	3
Domestic Troubles	3	2	5

Table II

Of 100 Chronic cases (insane for periods of 2 yrs and upwards)

	Male	Female	Total
Heredity contributed to the production of	16	18	34
Alcohol " " " "	16	7	23
Epilepsy	5	6	11
Self-abuse	12	6	18
Other sexual excesses	4	5	9
Puerperal state		4	4
Old age	1	1	2
Privation	1		1
Climacteric period		7	7
Sunstroke	4		4
Religion	6	6	12
Grief	3	6	9
Wounded Feelings	2	6	8
Disappointed Affections		1	1
Domestic Troubles	2	5	7

On contrasting these two tables it will be seen that in the second intemperance occurs less frequently epilepsy heredity, self-abuse, other

sexual excesses and moral causes more frequently.

It will also be noticed that in both tables the number of causes greatly exceed the number of cases - this of course being due to the occurrence in some cases of two or more causes.

To return to the subject of hereditary tendency. In nearly all the cases in which this was traced one or more exciting causes were also ascertained as follows.

Table IV

Showing hereditary tendency in 33 patients and the ascertained exciting causes accompanying it.

Hereditary with alcoholism <u>produced</u>				7 cases
"	"	"	and lactation	1
"	"	Epilepsy		1
"	"	Epilepsy and self-abuse		1
"	"	Self abuse		2
"	"	Self abuse and religion		1
"	"	Onanism		3

Table IV (continued)

Hereditiy with Lactation produced	2 cases
" " Pulmonary disease	1
" " Other bodily diseases	2
" " Puerperal state	3
" " Grief	1
" " Other unascertained causes	4
" alone (Congenital)	<u>2</u>
	33

It is more than likely that the number in which hereditary tendency was ascertained do not represent its actual frequency on account of the difficulties often met with in trying to trace it. In most instances I could not obtain any information concerning the grandparents, and this is a point of real importance for it is well known the parents may be quite healthy while the child inherits disease from its grandparents.

Of the 33 patients in Table I 31 had

relations actually insane, in the other 2 cases near relatives were epileptic, but not insane.

A man suffering from diseases such as chorea, paralysis, hypochondriasis and other nervous affections may transmit a tendency, which becomes insanity in his descendants, but, in making up these tables no account was taken of such disorders because it would be impossible to obtain anything like complete information on these points, in so many cases, especially among the class to which pauper lunatics belong.

It is said that mothers are more likely to transmit insanity to daughters, and fathers to sons; this is certainly borne out by the 33 cases above mentioned as shewn in the following table

Table IV

Showing the insane relatives of 33 patients
Males

Of 12 patients	5	had insane fathers
	2	" " mothers
	5	" " brothers
	4	" " sisters

Females

Of 21 patients	4	had insane fathers
	6	" " mothers
	4	" " brothers
	7	" " sisters
	6	" " uncles
	3	" " aunts

Under certain circumstances insanity especially if in both parents is apt to become intensified in the offspring. It is however liable to limitation in transmission in two ways viz under adverse circumstances its subjects descend gradually to idiocy, sterility

and extinction, or, by being under favourable circumstances and marrying with the sound they tend to return to the healthy type.

Intemperance or the excessive use of alcoholic liquors is of all the exciting causes the one which in this country is the greatest factor to insanity. It is extremely difficult to estimate correctly the direct and indirect effects of alcoholism, but the misery, privation and crime to which it gives rise, affecting not only the individual himself but also others connected with him, are no doubt widespread causes of insanity extending its evil influence to the third and fourth generation. The Earl of Shaftesbury in giving evidence recently before a Select Committee of the House of Commons stated that in his opinion intemperance was the

cause directly or indirectly of two thirds of the insanity which occurs in this country, and this is the opinion of one who has given the matter much attention and whose opinion is well worthy of consideration.

That the excessive use of alcohol has a most prejudicial effect on the nervous system there can be no manner of doubt, it is sufficient to ruin the most healthy mind. But, often the craving for alcoholic liquors is merely a symptom of disease yet even here it comes in as a cause hastening the already commenced destruction of the mind.

In Table I it will be seen that 35 out of 100 persons admitted were addicted to intemperance and, although in the majority of these cases there were one or more causes besides, in all of them it may be safely assumed that it was a cause, not in all cases primarily

but sometimes at first symptomatic of disease and secondarily a cause.

Taste for alcohol may be transmitted from the parents to the offspring or it may be slowly acquired or developed through the force of bad example, educational vices, and habit for stimulants taken in any quantity during a length of time create a craving for themselves, a desire or vice which did not belong to the individual originally.

The evil effects of alcohol on the system becomes manifested in a variety of ways or conditions giving rise to very different forms of insanity.

In the earlier stages of intoxication there is disordered circulation usually evidenced by excited talk and a more rapid flow of ideas; the power of self-restraint is often diminished, also, the power of coordinating thought and action is diminished. These symp-

tions of intoxication cannot all be due
 to stimulation of the blood supply
 some of them must be directly due to
 the presence of alcohol. as, for instance,
 inability to coordinate thought and
 action may take place without any
 excitement. We may then assume that
 alcohol works mischief in two ways,
 by a direct effect on the nervous
 system and by producing a condition
 of excited circulation.

By incessant drinking the nerve centres
 are constantly irritated and stimulated
 excessively, also the appetite and power
 of sleep are destroyed; the nerve waste
 is in excess of the supply of nourish-
 ment. We have thus produced such a
 condition that the mental equilib-
 rium may be easily upset even
 by slight shocks. such as, an out-
 burst of anger caused by a quarrel, or
 grief

In another class of drinkers viz those who although intemperate, from not carrying it to much excess or some other cause, do not become the subjects of delirium tremens, but, on account of repeated irritation of the nerve centres stimulation, and vascular excitement with its following depression and melancholy, there is induced a disordered cerebral function which becomes developed into insanity.

Premature old age is a not infrequent result of intemperance persons long used to alcohol although seldom taking it to much excess lose their memory and fall into second childishness.

The evil effects of intemperance on succeeding generations are not less striking and positive than on the present. Dr Howe of Boston U.S. is said to have traced the cause of idio-

in 145 cases out of a total of 300 to parental intemperance but it is not commonly admitted, in this country, at least, that it is such a great factor to idiocy and at the Royal Albert Asylum only 16 out of 300 cases were ascribed to this cause. It does not necessarily follow that because the parent of an idiot happened to be a drunkard, intemperance was the cause of the idiocy, because the same progenitor might be strumous or epileptic or the subject of some other transmissible disease which causes deteriorated offspring. We have however frequently seen a deteriorated offspring produced by parents of intemperate habits and apparently healthy, the deterioration being seemingly due to intemperance. Two such cases we will relate.

In the first case the husband was for years considerably addicted to int-

emperance having contracted the habit before his marriage. There was no history of insanity among his own or wife's relations. He had a family of two sons and one daughter. The oldest son grown to manhood is a confirmed drunkard unfit for almost any employment, the second son is an idiot of the lowest type, after the birth of this son the father became of sober habits and the girl born six years later is fairly healthy.

In the second case as in the first there is no history of insanity either in the husband or wife's family. They are in fairly good circumstances. For the last 30 yrs they have been accustomed to the daily use of alcohol but not much to excess seldom going beyond the first or second stages of intoxication. They have a family of five sons and three daughters, one son is an idiot and one slightly

imbecile, two other sons are of very intemperate habits and otherwise lead a fast life, one daughter is intemperate. According to Dr Langdon Downe children conceived while the parents are intoxicated are liable to exhibit a remarkable phase of disease viz. arrestment of mental and physical growth with a peculiar facial expression. They may live for a period of 5 to 20 years and maintain a condition of permanent infancy.

A child that died recently in Merryflatts Hospital seemed to have a resemblance to those described by Dr Downe, when three months old it weighed only $5\frac{3}{4}$ lb, between its birth and that time there was not the least sign of mental or bodily growth its face had a peculiar aged appearance, its appetite up to the time mentioned was quite good and it passed nearly the whole of its time in sleep. It was

an illegitimate child. The mother confessed that both herself and the father especially the latter were drunk when the child was conceived. As however it is probable that a large proportion of illegitimate children especially are conceived during the intoxication of the parents it can hardly be the case that it always or indeed often, if at all, causes such malformed children.

Dr Sagnet, after tracing the histories of several families of drunkards through successive generations comes to the conclusion that as a rule the nervous symptoms in successive generations of drunkards are as follows

- * "In the first generation depravity, and drunkenness; in the second, drunkenness, mania, and general paralysis; in the third, hypochondriasis and melancholia; and in the fourth, imbecility or idiotism, resulting probably in
- * From Journal of Mental Science No 105

extinction of the race"

The same observer also ^{states} that sexual desires show themselves early in the children of drunkards and that the offspring of drunkards have an absence of moral sense; that hereditary transmission is more likely to take place through a drunken mother than a drunken father; and that epilepsy is the most common of all diseases produced through alcoholic heredity.

Sexual Excesses is the next and last cause which we shall take up in anything like detail.

This is a much more common factor of insanity than is usually supposed. In Table I page 15 it occurs 17 times as a cause and in Table II p 17 27 times; the difference in these numbers is we believe due to the fact that cures from the insanity to which

This cause gives rise, are comparatively rare and consequently these cases accumulate in the asylum.

Of sexual excesses there are two or three varieties viz self-abuse, excessive and indiscriminate sexual intercourse.

Masturbation is certainly one of the worst of all vices. There is no vice to which the insane are more inclined. It may like intemperance merely be one of the outcomes or symptoms of cerebral disease, but even then it reacts on the cerebral disease and not only renders a cure impossible but hastens the mind to the lowest depths of degradation; or, it may be the primary cause of insanity for, there is no vice which through time leads more surely than this to the destruction of the mind. This habit like other vices may, in a manner, be transmitted from parent to offspring.

The sensuality of the one handed down to the other; or it may be contracted through the force of bad example; among other probable incitements to masturbation are the consumption of too nutritious and stimulating a diet, as well as, the use of tobacco and alcohol by the young.

The mental impairment which occurs is due to the debasing moral influence of the habit, to the weakening effect of the discharge, the expenditure of nerve force and the irritation of the brain which has been compared in its effect to epileptic seizures.

Insanity, however although the most direct and probable termination of masturbation is only one of them as by its debilitating influence it may excite consumption or some other such disease to which the person may be liable; or, it may lead to a long train of nervous diseases before

culminating in insanity, such as headaches, spinal disease, hysteria or general paralysis.

Habits of masturbation usually exist in youths of a timid, pious, and retiring disposition, but again it is possible that this disposition may be the result of the vice. Among the earlier effects and signs of masturbation are the following, loss of memory and appreciation, languor and inattention. The individual becomes absent minded, undetermined and easily discouraged, he has a stupid, shamed look and often a half foolish smile. Other signs are said to be voracity in eating with a capricious appetite and a crave for highly seasoned food but especially for salt.

Indiscriminate sexual intercourse, although less debasing than self-abuse yet, has an evil moral effect while if carried to excess there is the same drain

on the system.

Excessive sexual indulgence between the married has not the same bad moral influence as other forms of sexual excesses. It is a common impression that married people are under no necessity to bridle their sexual desires, but, there is abundant evidence that such excessive indulgence is a common cause of mental disease; and it is undoubtedly the form of sexual excesses by which general paralysis of the insane is most commonly produced. —

We shall not enter, in detail, into any of the other numerous causes of insanity, but, regarding some of them we have a few remarks to make.

When epilepsy precedes insanity it is usually set down as the cause. In the tables given at pages 15 and 17 it occurs as a cause in 20 cases or 10 per cent; in all these instances it was a precursor

of insanity and no doubt ~~to~~ a great extent an agent in its production; but, epilepsy itself is a nervous disease so closely allied to insanity, that it is scarcely possible to separate them, it dovetails into insanity, and insanity is its natural termination, its existence indicates a pathological condition of the cerebral centres, also, the causes which most frequently lead to epilepsy are causes by which insanity is often produced. Of the 30 epilepsies alluded to in Tables I and II 5 had a hereditary tendency to insanity. 4 were in the habit of committing sexual excesses and 2 were of confirmed intemperate habits. In these cases therefore, and we believe in most cases where insanity is ascribed to epilepsy, it is not epilepsy but the causes which produced it that should be regarded as the causes of insanity.

It will be noticed that in Table I one case is set down as due to magnetism.

This was, at least, the probable cause, as the case is peculiar we will give a short account of it.

Alad 16 yrs of age was admitted into the asylum possessed of the delusion that his master was the Devil. On all other subjects he was quite rational and evidenced considerable intelligence and educational acquirements. His countenance had a somewhat stolid or apathetic aspect; but otherwise there was nothing abnormal in his mental or physical condition.

The following history was obtained from the boy's father and others.

There was no hereditary tendency to insanity. For a period of three months before his date of admission his employer a dentist in Glasgow was in the habit of taking him home to his own house two, three, or more nights every week and there applying (it is said for some experimental purposes) four

horse shoe shaped magnets each about
 six inches in length, two in front of his head
 and two behind, with a steel apparatus
 attaching them. The only effects these
 operations seem to have produced on
 him were to make him nod his head
 and feel heavy and sleepy. A few
 days before his admission he refused
 to go to his work stating as a
 reason that he was afraid of his
 master because he was the Devil, he
 was, however induced to go, but the
 same day about midday he left it,
 and wandering through Glasgow seem-
 to have lost his way. He was brought
 home at night by the police who not-
 iced him at Port Dundas gazing for
 about two hours at an empty building
 and when spoken to he affirm-
 ed that the Devil was in the building
 and that he was his master. About
 two months after admission he was
 discharged cured.

It would perhaps be too much to assert positively that the boy's insanity was the effect of the application of the magnets, but, it was the only assignable circumstance for after a most careful enquiry into the boy's history and circumstances no other likely cause could be discovered; and there can be no question about the influence of electricity over the nervous system.

We shall now conclude with a few remarks in relation to the prevention of insanity.

If we review the histories of a large number of insane we will find on looking at them as a whole that we have to deal with one great record of evil - there will of course be some exceptional cases but speaking generally it is one great mass of crime, vice, misery and disease; how few of these have lived a healthy and moral life!

how many have been born with a
 faulty organization, exposed to evil in-
 fluences and ignorant of the laws of
 their well being. Preventive medicine
 in all its branches is at present be-
 coming a subject of great importance
 and its application to insanity is
 by far the most hopeful method of
 diminishing an evil of immense
 magnitude as it strikes at its origin.
 We should begin then by diffusing among
 the people a knowledge of the laws of
 health, how to procure a sound mind
 in a sound body, of the cure **that**
follows the man "who errs 'gainst ho-
 nest nature's rules" affecting not only
 himself but also succeeding generations,
 of the consequences which may follow
 the marriage of diseased persons, of the
 effects of evil thoughts, evil actions
 and excesses of all kinds. Then
 each man should strive to obey
 the laws relating to the healthy

discharge of his bodily functions, store his mind with useful knowledge, avoid evil influences, study himself with subjects outside of himself, exercise self-restraint, obey the laws of morality, live honestly, moderately, and industriously.